

Wild Sardinia: Ethnographic Provocations. Research Report and Reply to Critics

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Abstract

The author of *Wild Sardinia: Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism* (University of Washington Press 2010) offers a summary of research and reply to critics. The work is contextualized in the context of contemporary debates in anthropology and environmental studies. The article discusses misunderstandings that might arise from reading across languages and disciplinary traditions, in order to broaden the scope of meaningful debate.

Keywords: political anthropology, culture and environment, ethnographic writing, Italy, Sardinia.

*Wild Sardinia*¹ was never meant to be a tame monograph. My ethnography is a work of engaged anthropology, a work that develops a controversial comparative framework for analysis, and suggests implications for ethical environmental social action in Italy and beyond. It is a profoundly transdisciplinary work, and as such, it deliberately seeks to disturb and transform established genres of knowledge production and objectification. Its goal is precisely to unsettle, yet remain respectful of the many diverse interlocutors who might discuss the issues raised. It is with pleasure, then, that I find debates unfolding around it from a series of book reviews published, for example, in *Anthropological Quarterly*, *H-Net Reviews* [Hist-Geog], *American Ethnologist*, *Social Anthropology*, *Environmental History*, and *Sociologica*. I am indebted to Marco Pitzalis (2012) for introducing my efforts to Italian sociologists, since it gives me a very welcome opportunity for critical exchange with colleagues who know the “terrain” as I do. Indeed, it is for this reason that I trust scholars interested in Italian rural studies to consider the merits and provocations of *Wild Sardinia* for themselves. In this commentary, I correct some misunderstandings that might emerge from reading across languages and disciplinary traditions, so as to broaden the scope of meaningful debate. I hope it will be helpful to those interested in my research results, and I welcome ongoing conversations to come.

Overview of the study

¹ Tracey Heatherington, 2010, *Wild Sardinia: Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism*. Seattle, WA, University of Washington Press.

There are several intertwined projects undertaken in *Wild Sardinia*. First, it is quite simply an ethnography, thematically focused on culture and environment but generally concerned with many themes of identity, family, gender, economy, politics, development and social change that have been explored by other anthropologists and rural sociologists in the context of Southern Europe. Condensing a twenty-year span of research visits to central Sardinia, including over two years of dissertation fieldwork in Orgosolo during the late 1990s, this book is the fruit of participant observation and other qualitative research methods. It draws from interviews and conversations with many Sardinian interlocutors in Orgosolo and beyond, in a variety of contexts. Its theoretical founding takes from divergent strands in European social anthropology and North American cultural anthropology, given my formative experiences in Canadian, American and British university settings.

Second, *Wild Sardinia* juxtaposes this extensive ethnographic study with an account of historical and recent policy discourses on nature protection and eco-development on the island. It builds on an anthropology of environmental conservation that blends political ecology with ethnographic insight.² The case study is focused on the controversial Parco Nazionale del Golfo di Orosei e del Gennargentu (usually glossed as the “Parco del Gennargentu” or “Gennargentu Park”). The book asserts a critique of the parks movement in Sardinia by challenging the ontological production of “the wild” in terms of both nature and culture. My argument recognizes the political stakes inherent in cultural representations of rural highland Sardinia as both an area of important national heritage of biodiversity and a troublesome “delinquent zone”. The many scientific reports and advocacy campaigns that establish rural Sardinia as a valuable wilderness tend to erase deep cultural, gendered and affective histories of the landscape. Ethnographic perspectives “from the bottom up” (including local politicians, municipal servants, forest rangers, forestry workers, pastoralists, housewives, teachers, students, unemployed workers, hospitality and eco/tourism operators, church leaders, union advocates, entrepreneurs and others) are offered to complicate contemporary narratives of environmental conservation in Sardinia.

Third, the book challenges the logic of backwardness sometimes used to interpret local mobilisation to protect forms of communal land ownership and use rights as the inevitable consequence of an unreflexive and unchanging pastoral culture. It critically reflects on the scholarship associated with theories of resistance, which have reified the concept as an objective category of analysis. Reviewing a number of historical accounts of resistance in central Sardinia going back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I took these readings of history as entwined with the present concerns and practices of identity construction, and responses to structural marginality. I went on to explore memories of resistance associated with the important demonstrations at Pratobello in 1968, and the evolving political consciousness that drew upon interpretations of Antonio Gramsci, Emilio Lussu and other important cultural models. My work is therefore an attempt to examine the social life of “resistance” in Sardinia as an ethnographic object that should be understood as an aspect of social poetics.

Finally, *Wild Sardinia* considers how this case study of contestation over a national park in rural Italy reflects upon contemporary environmental imaginaries at the global level. Its ethnographic focus is therefore actually twofold: it is not only concerned to document and interpret the social and political life of a town in rural Sardinia, but also to document and

² This scholarship was exemplified, for instance, by the work of Kay Milton (1996, 2002; cf. Lai 2001), Charles Zerner (2000), Anderson and Berglund (2003).

interpret the rich social life of visual and narrative discourses about that place that are to be found on the internet, in policy documents, in films and television, literature, and so on. Drawing on this material, the book enters into current debates about how cultural essentialisms related to the dual opposition of modern versus primitive have become central to claims about who should legitimately share authority to manage the conservation of rich but fragile biodiversity. Engaging with the emerging critical scholarship on “indigeneity” from Australia to America to Asia, *Wild Sardinia* asks provocatively whether we should think of rural Sardinian communities as “indigenous” or not. It argues that any lack of fit should be examined as the product of problematic assumptions embedded in the category itself; it makes no claim as to whether concepts of “indigeneity” in fact apply. Rather, I challenge policy makers, conservation advocates, and rural Sardinians themselves to examine their own assumptions. As the book problematizes idyllic visions of authentic traditional communities, it also recognizes the profound importance of debates and auto-critiques that evolve internal to communities themselves, or in dialogue with outsiders. Finally, it celebrates the possibility for a new generation of environmentalists and environmental professionals to resist the arrogance of ethnocentrism and embrace respectful collaborations with resident communities.

Dangerous methods

Readers coming to the book from different disciplines are sometimes interested by the first-hand accounts made possible by long-term ethnographic methods, and sometimes dubious that elements of subjectivity are deliberately embedded and acknowledged in these accounts. Pitzalis insists that I have portrayed too rosy a picture of community: it seems that for him, evidence of empathy or moral commitment might be tantamount to compromising naivety. Does he wish to accuse me of “going native”, or denounce the dangers of a womanish science? Either one would reflect rather badly on his own understanding of social theory and practice in the twenty-first century. Does he think a foreigner, or perhaps a woman, unable to fathom the complex socio-ecological realities of pastoralism? But I have never known Sardinian colleagues to be narrow-minded. On the contrary, the kind opportunity to offer a reply in ANUAC is consistent with the many gracious intellectual exchanges I enjoyed as a visiting professor at the University of Cagliari last year. I can only conclude, then, that different disciplinary orientations are at stake, or that some of the nuances in my prose have gone unnoticed. Pitzalis either misses or misreads much of the analysis. A few notes on ethnographic research and writing are therefore in order.

The project of ethnography realizes a struggle to resist the clamour of generalization that prevails in grand theory and abstractions of scale, in the mirage of statistics and spectacles of objectivity. Indeed, in its goal of “*taking people seriously*” (MacClancy 2002), the project of ethnography constitutes a continual provocation to rethink the assumptions and languages of social inquiry, and the commitments that might proceed from it. The result, unsurprisingly, reads somewhat differently than much of the literature on Sardinian pastoralism. Pitzalis charges that my “dangerous” account of fieldwork homogenizes the community and depicts only its good side. Let us look, then, at what I have actually presented about my fieldsite in central Sardinia.

In fact I not only overtly acknowledged that many forms of violence generated concerns, ambiguities, and ambivalences in daily life, I also placed examples of this at the core of my ethnographic account. In chapter 5, I discussed the case of a donkey that became a victim of violence alongside his master, who was killed after a barroom altercation in 1997. In chapter 7, I

discussed the violent intimidations acted out in 1998 by the self-proclaimed “Fronte Armato Anti-Parco”, including an incident involving the crucifixion of an endangered species of indigenous sheep, that implicitly referenced an historical case of brutal rape-homicide. In chapter 8, I discuss the longstanding problem of anthropogenic forest fires, and document an abject failure of communal grazing management. These are not pretty stories, and the social tensions that accompanied the events were not pretty either. I remind readers that many points of view are represented in the ethnography, and they illustrate quite serious disagreements, contradictions and social contests in process, including debates about the future of the commons. If I have managed to discuss this case study with some degree of tact and subtlety, I have merely fulfilled the obligation of respect.

I have argued that tragically violent events, including violence against wild species or ecosystems, should not be sensationalized, but rather, understood within a larger context of structural violence and marginality. Yet following Gino Satta’s (2001) important work in Orgosolo, I also indicted the romance of resistance, and even examined its cultural and scholarly construction (see also Sorge 2008). My logic neither effaced nor ignored the harshness of some aspects of social experience. I did, however, reject common assumptions that an inclination to violence is innate to Sardinian pastoral culture or inherent to communal tenure systems. Instead, I argued that evidence of vivid internal social critique and reflexive examination of traditions at the community level suggested ongoing processes of cultural learning and positive transformation, processes that could be supported by outsiders and experts prepared to engage all local actors as equals. I worry that Pitzalis does not seem inclined to do so.

In his most caustic comments, my reviewer seems to betray an agenda of his own: a curiously belligerent disdain for anthropology itself, and particularly for methods of fieldwork that draw the researcher (perilously, he suggests) close into the social world of one’s informants. For Pitzalis, an anthropologist’s view redoubles “*the enchanted eye of the local guide*”, and easily succumbs to a “*mirage*” of harmonious ecology. His description draws from a thin reading of chapter 2, in which I set out to help readers understand how local people might perceive the landscape rather differently than tourists, biologists, or environmental activists. Pitzalis triumphantly conflates “*the anthropologist’s*” (my) perception with the viewpoint I report of an ecotourism guide, and gives me no credit for the critical sophistication progressively revealed through later chapters. He then pronounces that I have “*abandoned sane objectivity*” for the sake of social justice. His repetitive recourse to admonishment of bias is revealing. In particular, my agenda for robust reflexivity has nettled Pitzalis to lash out at the discipline as a whole, something hardly fair to my colleagues, and perhaps rather cunning at heart.

Dangerous epistemologies

My research was presented as situated knowledge: deeply committed to empirical specificity and awareness of context, without foreclosing opportunities for comparative examination that have characterized important anthropological insights on the wider world. There are passages written from a first person perspective that place me deliberately within the context of dialogues and anecdotes, and open up analytical questions about their interpretation. In other words, along with poststructural interrogation of the concepts through which social scientists have come to describe central Sardinia, the discussion in *Wild Sardinia* is deliberately open-ended, and acknowledges a partial perspective. For feminist epistemologies that resist a falsely constructed

“god’s-eye view” of the world (Haraway 1991), the only way to build grounded comprehension is to recognize that all knowledge is contingent and incomplete. Sandra Harding calls it “*strong objectivity*” (1996). A dangerous epistemology, to be sure! And perhaps, it is a topic for ongoing discussion.

In any case, I would not claim to know everything about my fieldsites; learning is an ongoing process. Nevertheless, I believe that the subjective voices and experiences reported in my ethnography should be valued as legitimate sources of understanding, and my analysis of them should be treated seriously.³ This hardly amounts to the “militant anthropology” Pitzalis rails against in his review, but here, too, the critique might reveal more about the reviewer’s own pretensions than about the book. What is it that arouses such petulant contempt?

In her consideration of “*the perils and prospects for an engaged anthropology*”, Louise Lamphere opens further insight into the competing epistemological commitments at stake. She reflected,

In the United States we have come to realise that we need to do three things as we become increasingly engaged with the world: first, transform our relations with the public in order to overcome entrenched stereotypes and foster current images that accurately depict anthropology today; second, continue to change our relations with the communities we work with, by attending to their concerns in formulating research questions and by viewing them as equal partners in carrying out research and educational activities; and third, work out effective ways of doing research on critical social issues that will expand the influence of anthropology in political arenas and policy debates. (Lamphere 2003, 153)

My own vision of anthropology has of course been inflected by the larger zeitgeist of the field, particularly in the North American context where I now teach. While not everyone agrees on the form that an engaged anthropology should take, there is growing acknowledgement that ideologies of objectivity have often inhibited certain ethical engagements in social science. At the same time, some backlash is easily discernible from those most invested in conventional models of scientific scholarship that prescribe objective distance. These “science wars” create rhetorics that efface the real range and richness of our collaborations, for as Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry (2010) point out, there are many antecedents to the engaged anthropology of today that took shape under the defining umbrella of a responsible science. This is the core of our Boasian legacy, in fact.

Taking a more interdisciplinary perspective, initiatives to put human engagements at the center of responsible scientific practice have characterized some important historical moments. The Pugwash Movement launched by Einstein and Russell, for example, enabled leading nuclear physicists to articulate a conscientious political voice and promote disarmament during the cold war. Prominent scientists today still participate in this vital movement to diffuse nuclear risks and dangers, as well as more wide-ranging initiatives in “global responsibility”. It is in this spirit that I find common ground with many colleagues across anthropology and a range of other disciplines, not all of whom will share my particular intellectual orientations. While some critics will inevitably insist on conflating feminist epistemologies, reflexivity and ethical concerns with a vaguely dangerous “postmodernism”, I have no interest in fighting over petty academic

³ In truth, the reviewer does not seem to have read the later chapters of the monograph with much care. It requires bold effort to work in a second language, and it appears to have been a struggle to undertake the full book with attention.

interests. Rather, I am concerned with the bigger picture: what we as scholars are doing in the world, and what that world will look like in the near future.

Relevance and comparative ethnography

Ethnographies of conservation undertake projects of critique that can hit close to home. Yet as we face growing environmental risks and increasingly vulnerable ecosystems, we cannot afford to be uncritical of the neoliberal schemes organizing nature protection today.⁴ As Pitzalis noted, I have criticized the WWF, whose narratives about wilderness in Sardinia have been manifestly top-down, and whose rejection of meaningful dialogue with local residents I witnessed myself.⁵ Those who read my ethnography more carefully, however, will also discover a deep appreciation for many of the forest rangers, agency personnel and municipal leaders who try to engage local residents respectfully in dialogues to generate better sustainability. This is even clearer in my recent writing (Heatherington 2012). My critical efforts are guided by an interest in achieving viable collaborations for environmental action in rural Sardinia. It is far from radical, I think, to argue that a new generation of ethical environmentalists must be prepared to take local people's experiences, interests and perspectives seriously, if they are to succeed.

Pitzalis seems ready to dismiss my critique of the parks movement in Sardinia, because he claims I was intellectually "hostage" to the cultural vision of my interlocutors in Orgosolo. He deploys the charged language of kidnapping to deny the legitimacy of my ethnography as a research tool. Note that my account included the voices of some local people who were in fact cautiously supportive of a park, but concerned about the terms of land tenure and management agreements that would have a long-term impact on the ability of the municipality to direct its own development. The eagerness of Pitzalis to dismiss their concerns bears unfortunate resemblance to the logic of Sardinian government authorities who flagrantly dismissed the voices of local mayors during the debates about the institution of a national park in 1998. Among other things, my research reviewed evidence that legitimately elected representatives of rural communities were denied effective participation in negotiating the terms through which large parts of communal territory would become subject to centralized management as a national park. When the mayors protested, they were simply dismissed as being captive to threats of intimidation, and politicians at the state level refused to even go and meet with them. How, then, were people to articulate a political voice, if they were criminalized at the outset, and

⁴ A considerable literature is emerging in geography and anthropology to challenge the institutional framing of environmental conservation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. See for example West et al. (2006); Brockington, Duffy (2010); Igoe et al. (2010); Büscher et al. (2012).

⁵ It would seem a fair critique that my fieldwork failed to pursue contacts and interviews with WWF organizers, but as it happened, I tried, and they were never available. Over the course of dissertation fieldwork, I tried repeatedly to visit local offices in Nuoro during apparent open hours, but found the doors always closed. I called, but got no answer. After graduation, I continued my quest by email, but only one brief note was returned, along with a pdf document that I included in my study. Finally, as a faculty member, I hired a Sardinian Ph.D. Candidate in Biological Sciences at my university to offer me critical perspective, and undertake a few interviews when he visited home in Sassari. Unfortunately, he too was ultimately unsuccessful in obtaining appointments at the WWF offices. ("*What do they do?*" he asked me, "*They are never there!*") Accordingly, I worked with what I had, and await future opportunities for firsthand exchanges with WWF program planners and activists, who might offer me a different perspective.

representative democracy denied? Under these circumstances, the relevance of political anthropology to unfolding debates about nature conservation and rights to resources seems clear.

We often explain to students that anthropology is a field dedicated to making the exotic familiar, and the familiar exotic. Good anthropology is supposed to make us reconsider the assumptions we take most for granted. Michael Herzfeld (who has indeed been an exceptional mentor, though not my only intellectual model) has sometimes called this “productive discomfort”. Why discuss a theme like indigenous identity construction in the strange context of Europe? I found the exercise compelling, both because “indigeneity” is a theme with timely resonance in discussions of culture, environment and rights, and because rural Sardinians often made ironic comparisons between themselves and North American Indians. Efforts at comparative analysis stimulate our field, and while there are limits to every comparison, it is in exploring them that we have often found surprising insight. This principle motivated my development of a key concept that some reviewers have targeted as contentious. I drew on anthropological literature about the Australian aboriginal dreamtimes in order to think broadly about evolving cultural narratives of environmentalism that emerge in a scattered collage of images, texts and databases on the World Wide Web (Heatherington 2010, 20-24). Such a bold choice of metaphor is necessarily open to debate, but this is how I introduced it:

Global approaches to ecology and environment constitute a strategic field of imagination within which social and political relations of power are negotiated and naturalized. I understand them collectively as “dreamtimes”... The virtual landscapes of Sardinia that have now become so compelling exist in these global dreamtimes of environmentalism. They are the evocations of remembered and potential journeys through highly crafted spaces of transcendent imagination, spaces in which the signs of locality are remapped and transmuted into potent universals. (Heatherington 2010, 21)

As a heuristic device, this metaphor compels us to reflect on histories of European colonialism in the making of “wilderness”, and the ways that narratives about nature conservation continue to embed particular modernist cultural orientations and belief systems, all the while projecting an exotic primordialism on autochthonous cultures and landscapes. I argued that “*we can understand the dreamtimes of environmentalism as a supple dimension of cultural imagination that overlays regional geographies with stories evoking the presence of a universal, sacred, transcendent, timeless and global Nature*” (Heatherington 2010, 23). It is this technique of imagination that often undermines the claims of local communities to both resource rights and meaningful participation in environmental management of protected areas. For this reason, I stand by the useful provocations of the dreamtime metaphor, as I stand by the provocations of ethnography that presents perspectives “from the bottom up”.

There are good reasons why I appreciate the willingness of Pitzalis to explore cooperation between our fields. Borrowing from cognate disciplines can generate real inspiration, as I found when I studied the work of sociologists such as Benedetto Meloni (1984, 1996) and Alain Touraine (1988). It is wise, of course, to recognize one’s own limitations when indulging in cross-disciplinary critique.⁶ The reviewer may have little experience with the extensive

⁶ Pitzalis mistakes some of the intellectual connections between my work and its antecedents: for example, he incorrectly identifies my discussions of alterity and indigeneity as derivative of Michael Herzfeld, without understanding my synthetic work with sources such as Johannes Fabian (1983), Tania Li (2000) and Moore et al. (2003). Similarly, he oversimplifies my discussion of James C. Scott (1985),

anthropological work on aboriginal knowledge systems, any more than with the abundant contemporary literature on political ecology. To give the benefit of the doubt, however, I keep in mind that precisely because interlocutors from other fields tend to share only a little of our intellectual history in common, they should be celebrated for their curiosity. Despite many disagreements, I find genuine efforts toward productive collaboration to be sincerely generous.

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whose classic insights are contextualized by the critical readings of Sherry Ortner (1995) and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2005), a theoretical debate which he has not followed.

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